

“Perceptions of the Communications Studies Major: Is There a Female Stereotype?”

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By

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Abstract

This paper investigates whether there is or is not a correlation between feminine perceptions of Communications and the relevance of the major. One Hundred Cal Poly San Luis Obispo students were asked to complete a survey that included basic student demographics as well as if they have taken courses within the major or know anyone within it, their perceived relevance of the major, and whether they believed it to be for males or females. The test between the two variables was shown as approaching statistical significance. After analyzing these results, using feminine perceptions as the independent variable and the relevance of the major as the dependent variable, we were able to conclude that the level of feminine perception could be used to help determine someone's perceived relevance. Additional tests were run to investigate if there is correlations between "Communications as a relevant major" (CRM) correlated with: "Communications as a Major meant for Men" (CMM), Feminine Traits (FT), and Masculine Traits (MT). These resulted in approaching statistical significance between CRM and CRW as well as among CRM and FT. The results did not demonstrate statistical significance between CRM and CMM as well as among CRM and MT. We speculate that due to the limitations of our research, there is still the possibility of an even stronger correlation amongst our hypothesis.

Literature Review

Communication is defined as the act or process of using words, sounds, signs, or behaviors to express or exchange information or to express your ideas, thoughts, feelings, etc., to someone else (*merriam-webster.com*). Communication is an on-going process that

ceases from stopping, even when one is not saying anything. Usually seen as basic human nature, students getting ready to apply to potential universities often overlook this major, due to the fact that they already know how to talk to others. This assumption, and others that will be mentioned, impede undergraduate students from possibly pursuing a major in Communications and seeing all it truly has to offer.

Being experienced in Communications studies has its advantages for those who major in it. For example, in their article on the centrality of communication in education in the 21st century, Pearson's and Morreale's (2008) sole purpose was to determine the reasoning for why communication studies are crucial in every area of a student's life. They did so by conducting a data analysis of nonacademic (newspapers, magazines, reference books, and basic search engines) and academic (academic journal articles) literature starting from 1998 until 2006. While they found other skills are important to have in life, having proficient communication skills will ultimately provide you with how to "react and manage life's challenges" (pg. 236, Pearson & Morreale, 2008). Furthermore, Communications is central in the following areas: "in developing the whole person, improving the educational enterprise, being a responsible social and cultural participant in the world, succeeding in one's career and in business, enhancing organizational processes and organizational life, and, addressing several emerging concerns in the 21st century" (pg, 225, Pearson & Morreale, 2008). Their views are relevant to our research because we have come to see these views in studying communications, but other students that aren't communications majors don't realize the potential benefits of learning and applying concepts from this field.

In considering Communications in the realm of epistemology, Popper (1972) speaks about having knowledge without a knower. For example, he introduces the idea of three worlds:

World one, of the outside reality, objective (if existent) by any standards, is the world two of the mental state of an individual, and then there is world three of the products of world two. All those worlds interact, most obviously world two on world three. The evolutionary advent of humans meant that the world three was greatly enlarged by the introduction of language, or more precisely that language acquired in addition to the more primitive components such as expression and communication, shared by many animals, also added descriptive power and above all argumentative.

Popper's three world's theory speaks about what Communications specializes in, and that is determining what a speaker means through their verbal/nonverbal actions and writing style based on predetermined knowledge the viewer possess about the mental state of the speaker/writer. Through this third world human behavior humans rapidly form a set of ideas about a particular person, group, or thing along with characteristics we expect them to possess.

This leads to the definition of stereotyping, which is a simplified and standardized conception or image invested with special meaning and held in common by members of a group (*dictionary.com*). Our literature we will be reviewing focuses on stereotyping and gender. When it comes to the major or minor of Communications, stereotypes are plenteous. The first is in accordance with the name itself; Communication. When the word is heard by those unfamiliar with major, its definition is taken literally and the

stereotype of Communication classes consisting of solely talking is developed. To further this idea, most students' opinion of themselves is that they have already mastered the English language, so there is no point for them in majoring in something "they already know how to do." The literature we will be reviewing focuses on the stereotype of Communications as a major for athletes, a major for women, and a major about talking. Furthermore, we will be reviewing literature about gender stereotypes that result in negative perceptions of what men and women are capable of.

To begin, Communication is known as being a major that is commonly picked by among athletes, particularly football players, so it creates this notion of it being an inferior major. For example, in a 2010 study on "Academic clustering and major selection of intercollegiate student-athletes" (Schneider, Ross, & Fisher) found that in the Big 12 Athletic conference in 2001, 143 (59.58%) of 240 football players were in either in Communications, Business, or Social Science. Additionally, the authors found in 1996, that social sciences and communications were the most common with nearly 37% in the Big 12 Athletic conference had those selected majors. Furthermore, the authors found The University of Nebraska had 20% and the University of Colorado had 30% of their football players majoring in communication studies during 1996. With these numbers, it can be applied that most Communication programs across the nation have a number of football players in their courses. There is a stigma associated with football players as the "dumb jock" (Nelson, 1983). To elaborate on this term more, Nelson (1983) writes about in her article, "Faculty attitudes toward male revenue and nonrevenue student athletes:"

Few characters in the U.S. culture stimulate negative images more startling or suffer more misunderstanding than "dumb jock" student-athletes. It is assumed,

particularly at large institutions, that an athlete is socially inept and does not do well in the classroom and student-athletes' lack of contact with the campus community makes them a group susceptible to stereotyping (pg. 217).

This association with jocks as dumb and jocks as communications majors leads to people to take Communications less seriously as a major of reputable choice.

Communications is also a major that is female dominated which causes people view it as a feminine major and will make men not want to join. For example, In a 2010 article by *Forbes*, "Top 10 College Majors for Women," (Tulshyan) it was reported that there were 49,405 female Communication majors and 29,985 male Communication majors respectively. To illustrate why this is, the author elaborated that:

Boys and young men often pursue science for science's sake, whereas girls and young women tend to view science as a tool for some other purpose, often attached to the social good. It's no surprise, then, that Nos. 5 to 7 on the list are psychology, visual and performing arts and communications, respectively. With these majors, common career paths include sales, counseling and teaching.

With typically men seeing Communications as a "soft science" like this article proclaims, their negative stereotypes will be communicated to other men and women. These are only some of the formulated stereotypes about the major that often cause it to be disregarded. Furthermore, McCreary (1994) speaks in his article, "The male role and avoiding femininity," that, "males from an early age are more likely to be punished for acting like a 'sissy,' while females acting like a 'tomboy; tend to be tolerated and, at times, even rewarded by others" (pg. 518). This turns off people to the field of Communications as

well because of how most boys are brought up from an early age that being associated with femininity is not good with becoming a man.

Among the previously mentioned stereotypes, the one that this study will focus on is people's perceptions of Communications as feminine, which is why it is dominated by females. In a report done on the availability of statistical data by Yi and Dearfield, "The status of women in the U.S. media 2012," found that women graduates have outnumbered men in Journalism and Mass Communication major from 1999-2010. Furthermore in 2010 alone, women accounted for 73.5% of the graduates while their male counterparts accounted for 26.5%. The gender myth of a woman's affinity for talking in combination with the major's name solely has served to create the impression that communication courses consist mainly of women talking to one another.

It's also difficult for people to change their stereotypes because of "confirmation bias," which is defined as a tendency for a person to search for information that confirms one's preconceptions (*alleydog.com*). This shows that when comes to a personal stereotype one possesses, the individual has the tendency to sustain it rather than alter it. We maintain these stereotypes even if we come across evidence that contends it, however; in the case of men and women there is a constant over inflation of how drastically different we are. According to authors Canary & Hause (1993) from the article, "Is there any reason to research sex differences in communication?" they speak on the stereotypes people generally have about males and females:

Stereotypes of women include such traits as kindness, nurturance, relational sensitivity, warmth, and expressiveness; stereotypes of men include such traits as

dynamism, assertiveness, competition, task-orientation, and competence” (pg. 135).

These stereotypes make people believe men are natural leaders and women are naturally emotional. For women, these stereotypes keep them from advancing and getting equal pay as men in the workplace (Grasz, 2011). For men, these stereotypes prevent them from having equal custody of their children in divorce because, according to *attorneys.com*, “only about 10 to 15 percent of divorced or single fathers have sole custody of their children. The remaining fathers have either joint custody or no custody of their children.” Furthermore, the way in which we communicate is a constant target that has been used as the basis for many books such as John Gray’s (1992), *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*, and Linda Papadopoulos (2009), *What Men Say, what Women Hear*. In such books, the premise constantly revolves around how the speaking patterns of women and men is so rudimentarily distinct to the point that we both pertain to completely alternate communicative cultures.

This fundamental stereotype that has been around and has persisted through the decades has such a crucial effect on the importance of the Communications major. It has trivially served to categorize the types of communication patterns into two simple categories: the way women communicate and the way men communicate. Although, gender could potentially play a part in the way one communicates there is also a multitude of other factors that determines a person’s pattern including whether or not they were raised in a high context or low context culture (Gudykunst, Matsumoto, Ting-Toomey, Nishida, Kim, & Heyman, 1996). According to the authors, a high context culture favors collectivism and a low context culture favors individualism. These are key

terms one learns in an Interpersonal Communication class, but because many Non-Coms majors' have no interest in learning about Communications Studies, most will live in a culture having no idea what type of culture they are associated in. This provides people with low self-awareness about the culture they're in or the type of culture they were raised in, which both directly influence their communication style.

This study is important for us to undertake because we want to set out to prove that college students do have stereotypes that Communications is a study meant for women and is therefore to be taken less seriously. To prove this, we will design a study that reveals the inner feelings our participants have about Communications and their perceptions of it being feminine a major. In the essay, "Ensuring communication research makes a Difference," Keyton and colleagues explain the vital components in research that can create more reliable results and ultimately make a greater contribution to the field of communication research. Their most significant suggestion is to adjust the terminology or message one is attempting to convey in order to fit the particular audience one is speaking to in order to build a common framework with participants. It is noted that even with adjustments; the messages of our study may still be misunderstood or left unappreciated, however; these measures taken to form a significant difference. More importantly, the false stereotype of the femininity behind Communication and how it may possibly prevent potential undergraduate applicants from applying is a study that has yet to be done. This will assist in opening up new areas to study in the communication field.

Gender stereotypes people have reside in communal and argentic styles that persist in making people not take women as seriously in a leader-role as they would for a man. For example, the authors, Eagly and Karau, wrote an article through *Psychological*

Review, “Role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders,” which examines the prejudices that prohibit women from reaching leadership roles. Due to the gender roles we assign males and females, it becomes difficult for women to break the glass-ceiling towards high ranking positions in corporate industry. The authors conducted a Gallup Poll question about preferring a man or woman as a boss. They also conducted a general social survey items pertaining to political leadership of men and women from the years: 1974, 1978, 1982, 1985, 1990, 1994, and 1998. The authors found that through gender stereotyping, women are viewed negatively when they don’t have a feminine/communal style and do have a masculine/argentic style; conversely, women are not taken as seriously as a leader when they solely demonstrate a typical feminine/communal style. They also found that it was harder for women to gain respect from men who were their subordinates as opposed to men, who the participants had no problems following their lead. Another thing they found was that women who are attractive have problems getting leadership positions, yet have no problems getting jobs that are not leadership positions. With men, there was shown to be no difference in their attractiveness to attain any type of leadership position. This study demonstrates how people do not taken women seriously as a leader, and therefore would not like to study a major that is associated with a feminine mystic like Communications.

Furthermore in the article by Eagly and Karau, they define both communal and argentic characteristics. They describe communal traits for women as: affectionate, helpful, kind, sympathetic, interpersonally sensitive, nurturer, and gentle. Then, they describe argentic traits for men as: aggressive, ambitious, dominant, forceful, independent, self-sufficient, self-confident, and prone to act as a leader. It would be

interesting to use these adjectives in our survey and see which ones participants will choose as ones that best describe Communications majors. If they tend to pick the communal characteristics, then we could conclude that Cal Poly students don't respect COMS majors' leadership qualities because they associate them as feminine.

The literature we've studied displays the typical gender stereotypes people hold and also the negative perceptions they hold about Communications. We want to further prove that Cal Poly students think negatively about Communications because they associate it with being feminine, and therefore an inferior major. Our research question and hypothesis seeks to explain our rationale:

RQ: What are the perceptions Cal Poly students have toward Communications majors?

Hypothesis: Feminine perceptions of Communications (high attractiveness, typical feminine traits, non-leadership) will be correlated with negative perceptions of the major (relevance, leadership, importance).

IV: Feminine Perceptions

DV: Negative Perceptions

Method

Participants

A convenience sample method was used to obtain 100 college students from Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. The sample consisted of 39 males (39%), 58 females (58%), and 3 declined to state (3%) that participated in a survey type questionnaire that comprised of three sections. Those who participated came from a total of 36 different major programs.

The top five participating majors were 9% from Animal Science, 7% from Computer Science, 7% from Business Administration, 7% from Sociology, and 6% from Mechanical Engineering.

Procedure

Cal Poly students were a convenience sample chosen through an interception technique used in which CP students were approached outside several high-traffic areas on campus. The students were approached and asked by both researchers if they were interested in taking a survey about communication majors. We requested that they answer it honestly and to the best of their ability. They were also reassured that their responses would remain anonymous.

Once they obliged to take the survey, we moved to the first portion of the survey that asked four demographic type questions about their gender, age, year at Cal Poly, and their major. We then continued on to the second section that entailed four questions regarding whether or not the students have taken any communication courses, 78% had taken courses and 22% had not. Another inquired if they knew students within the major, 48 % did while 52% did not. Those who knew people within the major were asked about their relation to them, 27% were acquaintances while 22% were considered to be close friends. It was imperative for us to inquire about this due to the fact that responses could be influenced by prior knowledge of the major.

The descriptive statistics for CRM, CMW, CMM, “Communications just as Important Major on Campus” (CIC), FT, and MT are as follows. CRM is based on a 5 point Likert scale from 0 – Strongly Agree, 1 – Agree, 2 – Neutral, 3 – Disagree, and 4 – Strongly Disagree; the mean = 1.32 and SD = .839. CMW is based on the same Likert

scale, with the mean = 2.30 and SD = .990. CMM is based on the same Likert scale, with the mean = 2.61 and SD = .886. CIC is based on the same Likert scale, with the mean = 1.33 and SD = .865. FT was selected by 83 participants from as low as 1 time to as high as 5 times, with the mean = 2.11 and SD = 1.048. MT was selected by 94 participants from as low as 1 time to as high as 7 times, with the mean = 2.83 and SD = 1.434.

Finally, the last section tested for the IV and DV through seven questions. Six of the seven had responses that were based on a Likert type scale (Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree) and were asked to circle the most relevant response to each of the statements. These questions asked participants about their perceived relevance of the major, its importance, whether it was meant for men or women, the physical attractiveness of students within the major, as well as, if they would oppose having someone with a communications major as a leader/manager. The question that did not have a Likert type response was the one that asked participants to circle traits they believed were best representative of a communication major. The list of traits provided was a mixture of fifteen stereotypical male (Aggressive, Leader, Ambitious, Dominant, Forceful, Independent, Self-Sufficient, Self-Confident) and female (Kind, Nurturer, Gentle, Helpful, Sympathetic, Affectionate, Interpersonally Sensitive) communication traits.

The descriptive statistics for the top 3 and the bottom 3 selected traits that best describe a Communications Major are as follows. The top result is Leader (MT) with the mean = .34 and SD = .476. The second most chosen trait is Self-Confident (MT) with the mean = .35 and SD = .479. The third most chosen trait is Helpful (FT) with the mean = .53 and SD = .502. The bottom three results starts with the third least selected trait being

Gentle (FT); the mean = .93 and SD = .256. The second least selected trait is Nurturer (FT) with the mean = .93 and SD = .256. Finally, the least selected trait is Forceful (MT) with the mean = .96 and SD = .197.

We decided against open-ended questions and opted for multiple choice type questions that entailed lists and rating scales as previously mentioned. This was done in order to account for responses in a more accurate manner. Another area we took preventative measures in was the way in which the questions were ordered. To avoid a response bias, we were sure to sequence the questions in a particular fashion, as to not convey the purpose of the survey or provide participants with an impression of how we would like them to respond.

Results

Our research question asked “what are the perceptions Cal Poly students have toward Communication majors?” To explore the research question, four correlation tests were conducted analyzing “Communications as a relevant major” (CRM) correlated with: “Communications as a Major meant for Women” (CMW), “Communications as a Major meant for Men” (CMM), Feminine Traits (FT), and Masculine Traits (MT). The first correlation test was between CRM and CMW. The analysis showed approaching statistical significance, $r = -.19$, $p = .06$. The second correlation tests used CRM and CMM. The analysis did not show statistical significance, $r = -.021$, $p = .84$. The third correlation test used CRM and FT. The analysis showed approaching statistical significance, $r = -.211$, $p = .06$. The fourth correlation test used CRM and MT. The analysis did not show statistical significance, $r = -.008$, $p = .94$.

To further analyze the data, four correlation tests were conducted analyzing “Communications Importance on Campus” (CIC) correlated with: CMW, CMM, FT, and MT. The first correlation test was between CIC and CMW. The analysis showed statistical significance, $r = -.199$, $p = .99$. The second correlation test was between CIC and CMM. The analysis did not show statistical significance, $r = -.002$, $p = .99$. The third correlation test was between CIC and FT. The analysis showed approaching statistical significance, $r = -.204$, $p = .06$. The fourth correlation test was between CIC and MT. The analysis did not show statistical significance, $r = -.044$, $p = .67$.

We also ran two paired sample t-tests to further analyze the data. The first t-test measured FT and MT, the second measured CMM and CMW. The first paired sample t-test between masculine and feminine traits, with the FT mean = 2.013 and SD = 1.019, and the MT mean = 2.753 and SD = 1.514. These differed significantly, $t(76) = -3.391$, $p < .001$. The second paired sample t-test between CMM and CMW, with the CMM mean = 2.610 and SD = .886, and the CMW mean = 2.300 and SD = .990. These also differed significantly, $t(99) = 4.389$, $p < .001$.

Discussion

This study sought to evaluate perceptions of the Communication major having a more feminine nature, perhaps attributed to the fact that it is a major dominated by females. Our hypothesis was that due to these feminine perceptions (IV) of Communications it would be correlated with negative perceptions (DV) of the major as far as its relevance and importance were concerned. Our results suggested that there was indeed a slight correlation between our Independent Variable and our Dependent

Variable. The major's relevance and negative perceptions of its importance could be attributed to the high volume of females within it.

Theoretical Implications

Gender stereotypes are deeply rooted in our culture that nearly all actions, activities, and material items can be determined as having a male or female components to them. Although, it may seem that we have come a long way in our views when it comes to gender norms this study demonstrates that this is a misconception. Due to the fact that there was a near-significant correlation with the relevance of the communication major and the manner that it was viewed as a female major establishes that the female gender norm of “communicating” has an effect on the majors perceived importance. It is viewed as being a female major because it exhibits the female norm of “talking”. The times may have changed but gender norms are still inherent and determine the way individuals examine the world and the contents within it.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study have direct implications on the Communications major and why it is perceived as being for women. The stereotype underlying the word communication and how it is seen as being synonymous with talking, assists in creating the automatic assumption that the relevance of the major is not as important as others. Due to the fact that there is no previous research directly related to this study, we have paved the way for more potential exploration to be done on the way the Communications major is observed by others. This will ultimately assist in enriching the major by discovering what it communicates to those outside of it.

Limitations

After tallying up our results, we found that there were several near-significant correlations between feminine perceptions of Communications and negative perceptions of the major. A true significant correlation may not have been produced for multiple reasons. It could have been due to a small sampling size, as our survey yielded only 100 responses. Due to this sampling size we ran the risk of committing a Type II error. Had we had another hundred more respondents minimum we could have produced the correlation more visibly. Although the group of students that took the survey were a convenience sample that we managed to intercept in high traffic areas of campus, there were only two proctors available to distribute the survey throughout the campus to the students. This produced a setback because two proctors were not sufficient enough to garner a larger amount of responses in a timely manner. If we had a larger sample size, we may have seen stronger correlations within the predictions and hypotheses we established. The survey was distributed as randomly as possible to students that were in different areas of the campus, which resulted in diverse test subjects who were majoring in an assortment of different degrees. This diversity made it more possible to make generalizations about the entire population of Cal Poly students.

We feel that one reason we did not get as many results as we hoped was because we did not offer an incentive to take the survey. When the individuals take the survey, they would simply fill it out and carry on with their day. If we would have offered an incentive of some kind at the beginning of the survey, they might have been more eager to take it, and we may have produced more responses with ease, which would have, in turn, helped us to increase our sample size and decrease our risk of committing a Type II error.

Future Research

We feel that our main concept and study is still valid, but the distribution method as well as the aforementioned shortcomings of our survey and sampling technique would need to be changed in order to collect more accurate and potentially promising results. Since we had a small window of time to distribute the survey, input the data, and determine the results, it did not allow us the time necessary to go out on the field and conduct more surveys, as well as wait for more responses. For future study of this specific hypotheses and method, the sampling size would have to be much larger and broader to increase the generalizability of the results. A larger sampling size would produce more accurate and reliable results and by making it broader, surveys can be administered at multiple universities, thus providing results that are applicable across universities not just Cal Poly SLO. We would also suggest that the survey we produced be used again and although necessary precautions were taken in order to avoid a question bias, ideally there would be at least two different survey versions with alternate question order. This will confirm and reveal if the question order was in fact done in a proper manner that did not produce a question bias.

For future research concerning the intersection between feminine perceptions of Communication and negative perceptions of the major, we feel that, in addition to more refined sampling and surveying techniques, more potential confounding variables could be explored, other than gender. For example, one might want to investigate the potential psychological roots of the Communication major and the way it is attributed to being feminine, in order to determine whether they could be correlated at all. If they are potentially still correlated, however, perhaps research into the psychological roots would

enable the researcher to come up with more likely confounding variables, such as personality traits, past experiences, or systems of belief, rather than fundamental variables like age, gender, and major, that would more likely impact the relationship of these two variables.

While this research study resulted in minor limitations and near-significant results, there is some practical value to be seen. For those schools that have a deficit of male Communication majors this study has assisted in taking the first step in understanding one of the reasons as to why that is. With more future research on this topic we can potentially answer that question as well as comprehend the precise reasons Communications is seen as a major for females and the stigmas that result.

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Index

PART 1: Please answer the following series of questions to help the researchers keep track and organize all participants and their responses.

1. Gender? Male / Female/ Refuse to respond
2. Age in years? _____
3. Year in school? 1 2 3 4 5 ____
4. Major at school? _____

Part 2: Answer the following honestly by circling or providing the most relevant response to the questions.

1. Have you had any classes in communications before (such as COMS 101 - Public Address and COMS 102 - Principles of Oral Communication)? If no, skip question 2.
Yes / No
2. If you have had classes in communications before, indicate which ones you have taken.
COM 101 / COMS 102 / Other: _____

3. Do you know any students who are COMS majors?
Yes / No
4. What is the relation you have with the students you know who are COMS majors?
Acquaintances/ Close Friends

Part 3: Please read the following statements carefully and rate the most relevant response to the statement.

3. COMS is a relevant major.

1-----2-----3-----4-----5
Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

4. Communications is as important as any other field of study on campus.

1-----2-----3-----4-----5
Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

5. I would not oppose a communication major to be a leader/manager for my job.

1-----2-----3-----4-----5
Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

6. COMS majors tend to be more physically attractive.

1-----2-----3-----4-----5
Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

7. Based on the perceptions you hold about the field of Communications, circle all the traits you believe best represent a Communications major.

Aggressive / Kind / Nurturer / Leader / Gentle

Ambitious / Helpful / Dominant / Sympathetic

Forceful / Independent / Self-Sufficient /

Affectionate / Self-Confident / Interpersonally Sensitive

8. Communications is a major meant for men.

1-----2-----3-----4-----5
Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

9. Communications is a major meant for women.

1-----2-----3-----4-----5

Strongly Agree

Agree

Neutral

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

End of Survey: Thank you for your participation!